

News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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California's gold history lives in Empire Mine State Historic Park

Empire Mine State Historic Park is the site of one of the oldest, largest, deepest, longest and richest gold mines in California. The park is in Grass Valley at 10791 East Empire Street.

In existence for more than 100 years, the mine produced 5.6 million ounces of gold before it closed in 1956. (5.6 million ounces of gold is equivalent to a box seven feet long, seven feet high, and seven feet deep filled with gold.) The park contains many of the mine's buildings, the owner's home and restored gardens, as well as the entrance to 367 miles (the distance, as the crow flies, from Grass Valley to Magic Mountain) of abandoned and flooded mine shafts. The park consists of 805 acres, including forested backcountry and eight miles of trails – including easy hikes (for hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding) - in the park.

The Empire changed hands a number of times throughout its history, usually due to a drop in gold production. By 1956, the Empire Star mine reached a vertical depth of 11,007 feet. The 367 miles of shafts were continually pumped, and well known for maintaining a remarkable degree of worker safety.

In 1850 George Roberts discovered gold in quartz outcropping at the site. As word spread that hard rock gold had been found in California, miners from the tin and copper mines of Cornwall, Great Britain, flocked to the area to share their experience and expertise. They provided the bulk of the labor force from the late 1870's until 1956.

Among other things, the Cornish miners contributed a unique system of steam pumps to take care of the mine's constant water seepage, enabling increased productivity and expansion.

When he turned 21 years old, William Bourn Jr. inherited the Empire Mine from his father. With Bourn's own financial backing and the mining know-how of his younger cousin, George Starr, the Empire became a showplace in mining technology at the turn of the century – and a moneymaking proposition. The family's home and gardens adjacent to the mine also became a showplace. The house was built entirely of waste rock from the mine and was designed to look like an English country lodge. Bourn paid \$35,000 for the cottage and grounds.

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In 1905 Bourn built a “clubhouse” near his home. The Bourns and Stars loved to entertain, and their guests included visiting mining engineers, stockholders, and, one of their most famous guests, future President Herbert Hoover.

The owners of the Empire Mine lived in the home only a few weeks out of the year. The Bourns used some of their earnings to build the Filoli (named after Bourn’s motto of “Fight, Love, Live”) mansion in San Mateo County, where they lived most of the time.

To keep track of the mine’s 367 underground workings, a place called “The Secret Room” (named for its blacked-out windows) was built. In it, the entire room was filled with a scale model of the mine’s below the surface workings. Few people knew the room existed while the mine was in operation. Today, visitors to the park can see it in the Visitor Center. The model represents five square miles of underground workings. When the visitors go down the actual shaft in the park, they have journeyed only “one inch” on the model. Anything past “two inches” on the model is underwater in the actual mine.

In 1929, the Newmont Mining Corporation purchased the Empire from Bourn for \$250,000. The corporation also bought the North Star Mine, forming the Empire-Star Mines, Ltd.

During World War II, the War Production Board forced the shutdown of the Empire-Starr Mines. Even though the mine was later re-activated, expenses far exceeded the price of gold. The mine shut off its pumps, auctioned equipment and buildings, and, for close to 20 years, the mine was idle.

In 1975, the State of California purchased the Empire properties for \$1,250,000.

The Empire Mine State Historic Park is undergoing gradual restoration

Guided tours and audio-visual presentations are offered throughout the day at various times. For more information, call the park at (530) 273-8522.

There are a number of living history programs presented at the park during the year, including:

* Cottage Living History tours focus on the Bourn Cottage. Tours begin every 15 minutes between the hours of 12 p.m. and 1:20 p.m. and 2 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. Groups form at the Bourn Cottage patio, with a limit of 25 people per tour. The tour takes approximately 30 minutes. Dates include: October 6, 7, 13, 14, 20, 21, 27 and 28.

- Mine Yard Living History – October 27 and November 23 & 24 – The historic Mine Yard comes to life as volunteers portray workers of the past and enact a working day at the mine. Mine yard tours begin every 15 minutes between 11 a.m. and 3:30 p.m.

* Holiday Open House – November 23 & 24, 11 a.m. – 4 p.m. – Visitors are invited for a special tour through the Bourn Cottage and Clubhouse decorated with holiday decorations. Volunteers in costume enact a working day at the mine.

The gardens have been restored to resemble the original gardens, including a rose garden featuring old rose discoveries from the past.

Park hours are: January to April: 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.; May to August: 9 a.m. - 6 p.m.; September to December: 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Admission is \$3.00 for adults and \$1.00 children (6-12).

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